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Dylan lets music speak for itself at Parkview Field concert

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
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Hearing folk/rock legend Bob Dylan's familiar growl Friday night during his well attended concert at Parkview Field reminded me that he is not only a remarkable and unique talent but also that his music is quite timeless.

Dylan opened his show with the song "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat" from his 1966 album entitled "Blonde on Blonde."

As he stood at the front of the stage playing an electric piano, Dylan spat out the lyrics of this classic tune with genuine conviction and determination.

Looking like a carnival barker dressed in a black jacket trimmed in neon blue and white pants, Dylan seemed a little disconnected from the audience as he gazed straight ahead without making much eye contact with the crowd.

Not that it made much difference, most of the audience was familiar with Dylan's music and seemed very appreciative to be seeing him perform live.

The stage was kept to the bare minimum – no big sets, no major production. Just Dylan and his band, a large black backdrop and of course the music.

A sizeable mass of people formed at the front of the stage and wide range of different ages from small children to senior citizens could be seen dancing and clapping, taking photos of one another and thoroughly enjoying the show close-up.

More of a storyteller than performer, Bob Dylan did not introduce the songs or give eloquent stories about their origins. He spoke very little, only introducing his band near the end of the show.

Playing piano for most of the evening, Dylan let it be known that the night was about his music and he let the music speak for itself.

One after another, Dylan and his band did a brief excursion through some of his most hallowed songs.

Some of the classics featured in his set included "Like a Rolling Stone", "All Along the Watchtower", "Visions of Johanna", "Ballad of a Thin Man", "Highway 61 Revisited" along with an encore of one of his best-known and most-loved songs "Blowin' in the Wind."

As one would expect of a musician of his caliber, Dylan's band was superb. All of them were great players and bestowed his songs with more of a laid back, bluesy feel than many of the original recordings.

While his voice is not what it used to be, Dylan still has the capability to interpret a song with passion and zeal.

At times his voice did strain and crack but his mannerisms and urgent delivery gave the impression of an old-time preacher giving a sermon at a revival meeting trying desperately to get his message out to a weary world.

Having seen Dylan perform live once before in 2006 at the former Memorial Stadium, I must say he seemed to be a little bit more engaged with his vocal delivery at this show and was a bit more animated.

Dylan's voice, while derided by a lot of casual music listeners, really fits his music well.

While most of today's younger generation who have been raised on music drawn from and influenced by the TV show "American Idol" may find Dylan's voice gruff and unappealing, it's that voice that gives his music the grit that other singers with smoother voices who've covered his songs lack.

Dylan's songs are caustic, sarcastic, probing and thought provoking. No one but Dylan puts them across with such zeal and conviction and that conviction was in full display last night.

The highlight of the evening for me was when Dylan performed the songs "Things Have Changed," an Oscar-winning Best Original Song from the 2000 film 'Wonder Boys', and my personal favorite "Tangled Up in Blue", from his "Blood on the Tracks" album, which he changed from the original guitar-based version to a laid back piano-based adaptation with country overtones.

Several audience members were long-time fans of Dylan's music and were eager to see him perform live.

Sandy Merkling and her date John Metzger, both from Fort Wayne, were thrilled to be at the concert.

"I've been a fan a long time," Merkling said. "I'm excited to finally see him live."

"John has really been a big fan," she added about her boyfriend. "He's got every CD Bob Dylan's ever made."



Two other people who attended the show came all the way from Visalia, Calif.

Myron Sheklian and his son Christopher came to Fort Wayne for a friend's wedding and happened to stumble on the fact that Dylan was performing here.

Both Myron and his son had seen Dylan perform live before about 15 years ago but said that he didn't perform any of his older material at the show they saw.

"I like the blend of the old and the new songs," Myron Sheklian said of this show. "I also love the venue, beautiful venue."

"This one (show) for me had a better mix," his son Christopher added. "I enjoy all of it (Dylan's career) so this was great."

Seeing a legend like Dylan go through the paces of performing an almost two hour show of some of the best music of the last 50 years under the stars, out in the open, on a warm summer night again brings one word to mind: timeless.